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TAGS: ECON DR
SUBJECT: MICHES: LA ESPERANZA EN UNA CIUDAD PERDIDA (A RAY OF HOPE IN A LOST CITY)

¶1. (U) Summary: The trip to Miches emphasized the challenges facing a small town as well as the possible opportunities specifically concerning cultural and possible ecotourism. While in the town we visited an artisan workshop known as Arte Miches, on the outskirts of the city and conducted interviews with businessmen and community leaders. Artes Miches is an inspirational project that aims to instill the value of preserving the environment and of creating art works of value. The Artes Miches project can best be described as a ray of hope in a town with tremendous tourism potential. End summary.

¶2. (U) We recently visited Miches, El Seybo province from July 13 to 17. A town of approximately 10,000 people, the city has decaying roads, a minimal police presence, and little access to internet or fax machines. Nearly 50 percent of the population is under 19 years of age. Along our journey from El Seybo to Miches through the mountains we observed that a good portion of the road has collapsed. The damage occurred about three months ago and it appeared that the work to rebuild it had not yet started. Further down the road, little children methodically gathered dirt and rocks from the side of the road to fill in potholes covered in dirt and dust. Some of the kids were missing teeth and no older than six years old. This is because the road has not been repaired in years. As drivers of vehicles pass they often give the children monedas (coins) as if paying a toll. This town has a myriad of problems that are present in many small Dominican towns. Problems include a decaying infrastructure, lack of economic opportunity, and general idleness. Moreover, Miches is the major departure point for yola trips to Puerto Rico and drugs coming from South America are often dropped off the coast near Miches on the way to the United States. Many Miches' youth dream of leaving for the USA.

Background

¶3. (U) Miches is located in the northern part of the country across the bay from the town of Samana. Scenic mountains, slopes, hills, and the beach surround the town. The town seems to be very isolated and gives the sense of a sleepy village because of the condition of the roads. The major roads from Miches are to Punta Cana to the East and to Sabana del Mar to the West. The city is connected to other parts of the country through a road from El Seybo. It takes approximately four to five hours from Santo Domingo to drive to in Miches. Las Franceses is the poorest neighborhood in

the city. To the east of the town is the town of El Minas and to the West is the city of Sabana del Mar.

¶4. (U) The summers tend to be dryer, and rather hot, while months such as December are very rainy. The terrain consists of coastland as well as mountain slopes. The slopes of the mountain are generally red; however, they are covered with trees. After heavy rainfalls the slopes often get flooded and there are mudslides. As stated earlier the paved road to El Seybo that winds through the mountains was damaged heavily by rain. Furthermore, the mud roads are typically flooded during rainstorms.

Economics

¶5. (U) There are many small local stores such as hardware stores, restaurants, discos, and hotels. However, many people appear to work in a black market economy. Fixed employment is not abundant. It is estimated that only 25 percent of the local population has a fixed job and income. The town seems to have an abundance of SUVs such as Toyotas, BMWs, and Porsches; many of them have no license plates. The lack of gainful employment has encouraged many residents to leave Miches for major Dominican cities, Puerto Rico, or pursue illegal activities.

¶6. (SBU) When speaking to EMBOFF, youths perceived that the only Dominicans that buy houses in Miches are the narcotics and human traffickers. Not surprisingly, many youths from Miches dream of becoming a Yola boat captain or selling drugs. Many youths believe that a criminal career path can guarantee wealth and success. Families in this town like many other Dominican towns are reliant on remittances from abroad in order to survive. Jobs such as a police official

earn slightly more than US$160 in a month. US$300 per month is considered a good job. Two major banks operate here -- Banca Agricola and Banc Reservas. However, there are several small banks that line the city streets. The closest ATMs are located in the town of El Seybo which is the capital of the province and approximately one hour from Miches by bus. There are very few businesses in this city that accept credit cards. Therefore, cash is needed for all business transactions.

Politics

¶7. (SBU) The city,s political culture can best be described as interest based and clientelistic. The PRSC appears to be the most popular party in this region. Many of the jobs are government appointed and are determined by which party won the previous election. This is similar to many communities in this nation. However, most locals appear to be rather apathetic about politics. Many locals complain that there is a system to maintain the status quo that is reinforced through government jobs and nepotism.

Sociological-Cultural Characteristics

¶8. (U) The Artes Miches program is trying to increase the self-confidence of youth and help them to love their own culture and abilities. Instead of basing their self worth on how many gold chains or vehicles they have, the program aims to instill the value of preserving the environment and their artwork. The goal is to help them to value their own environment and their own abilities. It was inspiring to see Dominican men with initiative, drive, and vision willing to invest in the youth of this village. Two community leaders built this artisan workshop on the outskirts of the city where youths can create artisan pieces such as paintings, model boats, furniture, and sculpture. One of the men is a well known and respected artist who travels internationally for art competitions. He is also a trained carpenter who built a good part of the workshop with his own hands.

¶9. (U) The workshop consists of two buildings that both have several rooms and are very colorful. The artisan pieces can be colorful, lively, and reflect the history and reality of the Dominican Republic. Art pieces represent the history of the three nations that populated this nation. Furthermore, this organization is working to certify its organic farming products and thus diversify itself. Arte Miches has been able to acquire some land where youths can travel to the mountains and harvest crops. The organization also recently opened a gallery in the center of the town where students can display their art, showcase it, and sell it. This program is able to get the youth off of the street in a city where 50 percent of the population is under 19 years old. The ages of the youth in this project are from the ages of 10-19.

Public Safety

¶10. (SBU) A visible number of locals walk around the town with weapons that are not concealed. We spent four days in the town walking on foot every day. During our time there we did not see one member of the Policia Nacional on patrol. There are also no tourist police. However, we did see a Policia Nacional truck that was completely full of baseball players -- locals say that the Miches police chief is a big baseball fan. On our final day in Miches, we encountered the only professional armed presence that we met in the city. A member of the Dominican Coast Guard, he patrols around a very limited area. Police are not visible. Nevertheless, there is a police station in the city, but locals state that their response time is rather slow and we did not see one uniformed police officer. Locals drive around without license plates and can be seen doing other suspicious things. For example, EMBOFF saw one alleged fisherman studying a hydrographic map and holding a rather advanced handheld GPS satellite communications device, while sitting in a public area of a hotel. It seems unlikely that a fisherman would need such an advanced device.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) There is a clear lack of public investment in infrastructure and public safety in Miches. The poor roads, lack of water, blackouts, and low visibility of uniformed police borders are striking characteristics. The lack of work in an area with such a decaying infrastructure is also noticeable. Many working age locals sit idly around the city during the weekdays. The micro-entrepreneurial value of working has not been adopted. The most consistent workers are most likely those who work in the black market. That is why programs such as Artes Miches are so important. This program is instilling the value of culture and investing in a person's individual talents thus increasing their confidence of what they can create. In short, helping them to avoid drugs, trafficking, or dangerous yola journeys to Puerto Rico

¶12. (SBU) Comment continued: This visit reinforced the importance of investing in the youth and creating economic values that will encourage hard work, reinforce the local culture, and foster an entrepreneurial spirit. This information is pertinent in a city where 25 percent of locals are gainfully employed and many prefer to pursue illegal activities or wait for remittances. The trip shows there are Dominican leaders who sincerely want a better future for the next generation. There is hope even in forgotten cities such as Miches and this program illustrates there are Dominicans willing to invest in youth and change the culture.

-- Drafted by John Clarke

(U) This report and extensive other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site,
http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/
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